

# Training Animal Actors for the Pictures

By JOHN B. WALLACE

THE advent of the motion picture has opened up an entirely new field for the animal trainer. Some of the most interesting of the early pictures were those taken of wild animals in Africa and other countries. The men behind the pictures were not slow to sense the popularity of animals on the screen and as a result the animal actors now vie with the human stars. It was comparatively easy to train domestic animals such as dogs and horses to act before the camera. Elephants and camels also presented but little difficulty as they were seldom used except in their regular employment as beasts of burden to give local color to Oriental scenes. But when it came to the cat tribes such as lions, tigers and leopards, as Perlmutter says, this was something else again.

These animals are always dangerous no matter how well trained and accustomed to man they may be. It takes a man with great agility and a cast-iron nerve to handle them. Such a man is Curly Stecker, the animal director at Universal City and perhaps the greatest trainer of animal movie actors in the world.

Stecker is a young man in his early thirties. He was born in the copper country of Upper Michigan. When he was but a boy his parents died leaving him to the care of relatives. He was a high-spirited and most independent youth and when certain of his ideas were overruled by his guardians, he retaliated by running away with a hypnotist. He drifted from one traveling show to another until he finally found his forte in the menagerie of a circus.

When it was learned that he could handle wild animals his fortune was made. He was successively with Barnum & Bailey, Forepaugh and Ringlings. Then he went to work at the great Selig Zoo at Los Angeles and finally wound up in his present position with the Universal Film Company.

Stecker is a slender, wiry-built man with the steady gray eyes of the western plainsman. In fact he much more resembles the cowboy type than he does the conventional type of animal trainer, who is usually a foreigner with pompadour and waxed mustachios. He impresses the observer as a man who fears neither man nor beast but in whom the spirit of dare-deviltry is directed by a cool intelligence.

He was introduced to me as Curly Stecker. I asked him what his real given name was. He hesitated. "Well, my folks christened me Algernon," he finally admitted.

"Now ain't that a swell name for a lion tamer?" he added plaintively.

Stecker is in charge of the most varied assortment of animals that can be imagined. Bears, lions, tigers, leopards, pumas, wolves, monkeys, camels, elephants are some of the wild specimens in the Universal menagerie while the domestic assortment embraces everything from pigs to ring-tailed doves. It is the largest menagerie on the Pacific Coast with the exception of the Selig Zoo. And every one of the animals takes part in film productions.

Stecker not only uses his animals in the Universal pictures but he is frequently called upon by the other studios, which do not maintain a menagerie. The day I visited him he had just returned with three lions from a two-hour engagement with another film company for which he received the neat sum of \$250.

The collection of cats, as the lions and tigers are known among animal men, at the Universal does not compare in quantity with the enormous number of these jungle denizens at the Selig Zoo, which houses more than one hundred, but Stecker is ready to back them against any aggregation on earth in quality. Most of them he raised himself.

He has three four-year-old lions, out of the same litter, whom he calls Tom, Dick and Harry and of whom he is especially proud. They are what he terms man broke but are not yet trained enough for use in the pictures. Most of the film work he does with four six-year-old lions, two lions and two lionesses, although he has others whom he works occasionally.

He has a two-year-old lioness whom he raised on a bottle. She is as gentle as a kitten and idolizes Stecker. It is no unusual sight to see him leading her about the studio with nothing but a collar and chain. Needless to say these excursions are not very popular among the human actors who need no urging from their directors to register nervousness when Stecker appears with this immense beast in leash.

It is customary in some studios, in their jungle scenes where human actors and especially women are employed, to use an aged, toothless lion who would be incapable of doing damage if he so willed. But not in the scenes that Stecker directs. There is nothing moth-eaten about his lions. They are husky specimens in the prime of life. The sight of them crunching a horse's head or thigh, such as I saw them feeding upon, leaves no doubt in the mind of the spectator as to the condition of their teeth.

The filming of the scenes in which lions or tigers are used is done in an immense steel cage. The director who has charge of the production tells Stecker what he wants done and the animal trainer then takes charge of the scene directing both the human and

animal actors. The back of the cage, which is provided with numerous exits in case of trouble, is fixed up to resemble a jungle, desert or whatever the location in which the scene is placed.

The lion or tiger is then taken into the cage and rehearsed over and over until it grasps what the trainer wishes it to do. Then the human actors are called in and the scene shot by the camera. It does not take much of an actor or actress to register fear with the knowledge that there is a four-hundred-pound lion or tiger prowling around behind them and for this reason some of the best acting is done in the animal scenes.

"What do you use, a whip or meat to train the cats in these scenes?" I asked Stecker.

"Sometimes both," he replied. "But most of all I rely upon their habit of obedience. The hardest thing is to get them to understand what I want them to do. After they once get that in their heads the rest is comparatively easy."



Curly Stecker's little daughter with a lapful of lion cubs. She draws \$150 a week for acting with the animals although not yet three years of age.



Curly (A. C.) Stecker, the world's greatest animal trainer for motion pictures.

Joe Martin, the orang-outang, making a roar.



The smaller members of the cat family such as the pumas and leopards are much harder to work with than the lions. Tigers are also hard to train. The lions are the least treacherous and the most intelligent.

Stecker is never cruel to any of his animals. He never punishes an animal without just provocation. This can be readily seen by their attitude when he is about them. There is none of the cringing fear exhibited in the presence of some trainers. But he mixes kindness with firmness. When he tells an animal to do a thing he never lets up until he is obeyed.

Stecker has unusual success in raising lions. He has reared dozens of them and seldom loses one. A little incident showed me one of the reasons for this.

We were standing facing a wired inclosure in which were five baby lions that had just been weaned. While we were talking I noticed Stecker's eye roving

ing over these cubs. Suddenly he called to an attendant. "Those cubs look thin. Are you feeding them enough?" he inquired.

"I am keeping a pan of milk in front of them all the time, sir," the man replied, "besides meat."

"Well, put some eggs in their milk for a while and see if we can't bring them up," Stecker told him. "They ought to show more flesh than they are."

Another star of the Universal menagerie is Charley, the elephant, one of the largest in captivity. When we visited him, Charley was taking his daily drink through a hose. He much prefers this method of internal irrigation to any other and his little eyes twinkled with enjoyment as he squirted the water down his capacious throat. It is a dangerous moment for spectators, however, as it is Charley's idea of a good joke to turn the hose on anyone standing near.

When he had finished drinking Stecker called abruptly.

"Lie down, Charley."

Down went the immense hulk immediately.

"Roll over."

Up went the four ponderous legs in the air. It was a wonderful demonstration of the power of mind over matter to see this enormous pachyderm obey instantly the orders of the slight biped beside him.

Charley, however, is not always good-natured. He has gone bad and killed several of his attendants during his life. An experienced trainer can tell when an elephant is going bad as a rule and extra precautions are taken until his ugly spell is over.

The real star of the Universal menagerie, however, is Joe Martin, the orang-outang. No doubt those of my readers who are movie fans have seen this wonderful animal who shares with Teddy, the great Dane, the honor of being the most gifted animal actor on the screen.

Joe is now eight years old. Stecker got him when he was six months and has raised him and trained him. He is said to be the only orang-outang ever raised in captivity. Joe comes from the island of Borneo or Sumatra, I am not certain which. He belongs to the most intelligent of the family of great apes. In fact his intelligence is almost uncanny. He does everything but talk. Orang-outangs are very difficult to keep any length of time in captivity as they are of a melancholy temperament and usually pine away when kept alone. Therefore Stecker's feat in raising Joe is considered remarkable among animal men.

Joe seems to be of an ordinary cheerful disposition. He loves to play with anyone who comes about his cage. He will seize a stick or a piece of sacking and thrusting it through the bars will coax the bystander to attempt to take it away from him. It is some feat, too, to pull anything from his iron grip. I saw him drag a 200-pound man right up to the bars with a strip of jute sacking.

Joe is about the same size comparatively as an eight-year-old child. Orang-outangs keep about the same pace of growth as a human being and reach their fullest development about the age of twenty-five. They are also said to have about the same span of life as a human.

Their brain, while the most highly developed of any of the great ape family, does not grow in proportion to their body, however. Stecker says that Joe is as smart now as he will ever be.

"How on earth do you get him to do all the things he does in the pictures?" I asked his trainer.

"I do them first myself," Stecker explained. "Joe will watch me and then imitate my every action. Sometimes his attention will be distracted for a second and he will miss something. Then I will be compelled to repeat, but he seldom misses a cue. After a couple of rehearsals we are ready for the camera. Joe is actually easier to direct than the human actors."

The ape really seems to enjoy his stunts in front of the camera. He does a great deal of acting with children especially in the comedy pictures and he is right in his element when dressed up in boy's clothing.

Stecker's little girl and his three-year-old nephew work with Joe a great deal. Although he is no beauty, children do not seem to be the least bit afraid of him and he appears to enjoy their company more than he does that of adults. Incidentally it might be mentioned that these little tots draw a salary of \$150 a week for acting with Joe.

Joe, himself, is a valuable animal. Stecker has refused a sum in excess of \$20,000 for him and it is doubtful if twice that sum would buy him.

Most of the animals in the menagerie are used more for comedy films than they are for legitimate drama. The bears fit naturally in comedy films and even the lions are used considerably in this line. A great many of the animals such as wolves, and so on, are used to provide local color. Directors call for everything from porcupines to crocodiles and it keeps the menagerie attendants busy trying to supply them.